

PICTURE AND ACTION: THE PROBLEM OF NARRATION IN JAMES'S FICTION

by J. A. Ward

In a book review written in 1864, Henry James mentioned in passing that "the soul of a novel is its action. . . ." A few pages later he added, "All writing is narration. . . ." ¹ Like many of his youthful proclamations, the comments are interesting mainly because they indicate how radically James revised his literary principles in later years. For the earliest of the extant notebooks, those covering the 1880's, make it plain that James grew to regard the novel as essentially non-narrative. Even when the concept of action is viewed from the broadest, most Aristotelian perspective, the impression remains that the temporal dimension of fiction was of subordinate interest to James.

Of course he was reacting against the Victorian idea of "plot." In "The Art of Fiction" he ridiculed the popular notion that "a good novel" is "full of incident and movement, so that we shall wish to jump ahead, to see who was the mysterious stranger, and if the stolen will was ever found. . . ." ² James's organic conception of fiction led him to insist that "Character . . . is action, and action is plot. . . . We care what happens to people only in proportion as we know what people are." ³ Also his principle of intensity made him wish to "get everything out of [an action] it can give." ⁴

Still there is nothing unique or extravagant in James's denunciations of the heresy of plot. Dozens of nineteenth-century novelists implicitly repudiated the notion that "story" is somehow separable from "character." Though Dickens might offend in this respect, James found Trollope, who offended in many other ways, to be liberated from the bondage of plot. ⁵ James was no doubt correct in judging the relative plotlessness of his works responsible for his diminishing popularity, ⁶ but there are more important reasons for his repeated insistence that action is of secondary importance in the work of fiction.

James rarely conceived the idea of a story in terms of event. In his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, he wrote, "I might envy, though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable

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first and to make out its agents afterwards. . .” (*AN*, 44). In his notebook remarks on “The Real Thing,” James shows that the story came to him entirely as a static situation:

The little tragedy of good-looking gentlefolk, who had been all their life stupid and well-dressed, living, on a fixed income, at country-houses, watering places and clubs, like so many others of their class in England, and were now utterly unable to *do* anything . . . could only *show* themselves, clumsily, for the fine, clean, well-groomed animals that they were. . . (*N*, 102).

The problem of converting the situation to a short tale is one of “straighten[ing] out the little idea. It must be an idea—it can’t be a ‘story’ in the vulgar sense of the word. It must be a picture; it must illustrate something. . . . One must put a little action—not a stupid, mechanical, arbitrary action, but something that is of the essence of the subject” (*N*, 103). Thus, the developed idea becomes not a story, but a picture. The action is illustrative, not of interest in itself; more important, it is a revelation of some meaning inherent in the root idea.

Repeatedly James’s notebooks show his efforts to supply the animating action for an idea or a picture. He looks for “episodes” to “illuminate” (*N*, 130); he has “only an idea—and everything is wanting to make it a story” (*N*, 155); he must “enlarge” an idea in order to “get an adequate action” (*N*, 165). Likewise the prefaces show that James looked upon his finished works not as narratives but as static compositions—such as architectural constructions, mosaics, portraits, and pictures. The analogies to the visual arts are not to be taken lightly. James habitually discussed the relationships between parts of his novels in spatial rather than chronological terms, as when he spoke of one part “lighting” another or of the “aspects” of a situation.⁷

The subordination of action to picture is implied in several of James’s technical principles. What is the effect of foreshortening if not to convert narrative to picture? The foreshortened passage not only gives a dramatic unity to a sequence of disconnected events, but also produces the effect of simultaneity. When James resumed the writing of novels after his experience in the theater, he formulated the principle of the alternation of picture and scene: that is, the alternation of foreshortened narration, made concrete and immediate so as to resemble a picture, and dramatic scene. Each technique tends to convert an episode or a series of episodes into a single presentation. Relationships between incidents are not sequential, but—as James puts it—logical. Incidents are occasions in which aspects of a situation are exhibited; and the situation is looked upon as static, not fluid. As Francis Fergusson observes, James regards a fictional subject “as a metaphysical or moral entity rather than as a sequence of events.”⁸

It is difficult to imagine how any novel can represent experience inde-

pendently of time. Thus James makes concessions to the temporal dimension. Yet it seems to be of little interest to him. To understand this point, it must be kept in mind that James holds a unique view of the idea of change—that is, of the change in status or emotional or mental condition of a character, brought about by a set of experiences. R. S. Crane describes the plot of *The Portrait of a Lady* as one in which “the principle is a completed process of change in the moral character of the protagonist, precipitated or molded by the action, and made manifest both in it and in thought and feeling. . . .”⁹ Such a reading does not severely distort the form of *The Portrait of a Lady* or of any James novel. Reversals of position and attitude are evident from *The American* through *The Ambassadors*. Yet the view that the structure depends upon some *peripeteia* effected in time takes little account of certain important technical devices that would seem to minimize the importance of change.

When James composes a novel he is not so much interested in dramatizing what will happen to the protagonist as he is in dramatizing who the protagonist is. Yet the only way he can reveal a character's identity is by showing what happens to him. Thus Isabel Archer at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady* is to be thought of as a full revelation—a portrait—of the young woman imperfectly glimpsed in the first chapter. For its full exposure Isabel's character requires a set of relationships. The formation of these relationships is the action of the novel. Action is thus at the service of relations, which, in turn, serve to reveal character. The “developmental” element clarifies the central situation; it does not extend or alter it. James acknowledges Turgeneff to be the originator of the idea:

[The fictive picture] began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were. He saw them, in that fashion, as *disponibles*, saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out . . . (AN, 42-43).

To hold to his conception of portraiture, James relies to an unusual extreme on foreshadowing devices (what he calls “the play of the portentous” [AN, 305]) and on their opposite, reminders of prior events. The future is implicit in the present and the present recalls the past. In *The Portrait of a Lady* many examples suggest themselves. Most obviously, Isabel's principal interest in the first half of the book is in what the future shall hold for her; and in the second half, as the dominant characters of the early stages rejoin her, her mind, with the reader's, recalls her beginnings. In addition to her general preoccupation with her destiny, other details of Isabel's early history point toward the future: her hopes

for encountering the ghost of Gardencourt; her awareness that she cannot escape unhappiness; the presence of Ralph Touchett, whose own failure prophesies Isabel's; the appearance of Madame Merle, whom Isabel shall replace as Osmond's lover and Pansy's mother. The Countess Gemini is almost wholly a foreshadowing device. In turn, Pansy recalls the early Isabel, as do the return to Gardencourt, the death of Ralph, and the final proposal of Goodwood.¹⁰

Even in so simple a story as *Daisy Miller*, the technique shows that James's goal is portraiture rather than narration. The work falls neatly into parallel halves. Rome replaces Vevey in the second half, but the episodes and character arrangements are nearly duplicated. Giovanelli, Daisy's escort in the second part, balances Winterbourne in the first part; the visit to the Coliseum parallels the earlier visit to Chillon, each occasion acting as the climax to the section in which it appears. The subject in each half is Daisy's innocent disregard for conventions, but the second half is a deepening of the first half rather than an extension of it. Daisy's conduct in Rome has more serious consequences than her conduct in Vevey. The recurrence of pattern shows not that Daisy's life is markedly different, but that with the change of setting—from the relative freedom of the Swiss watering place to the greater rigidity of the American colony in Rome—a graver dimension of the original situation is revealed. In Part One, innocence is charming; in Part Two, innocence is charming and destructive. Part Two recalls Part One, as Part One forecasts Part Two. The method is not that of the diptych, in which two aspects of an occasion are seen, but that of perspective painting, in which the viewer is made to see progressively more dimensions of the immediate scene. The technique stems from James's "incorrigible taste for gradations and super-positions of effect; his love, when it is a question of a picture, of anything that makes for proportion and perspective, that contributes to a view of *all* the dimensions" (*AN*, 153). It is the method not only of such early works as *An International Episode* and *The Portrait of a Lady*, but of *The Golden Bowl*, a novel in which the second half requires that the values and attitudes of the first half be radically revised. In effect, the Prince's judgment of the nature of marriage—the subject of the novel—is deepened by the addition of Maggie's judgment, just as the reader's early estimate of Daisy Miller's innocence and freedom in the first part of the tale is deepened—not corrected—by the second half.

Such deepening is usually effected not by movement in time (though this is inevitable), but by movement in place (as in *Daisy Miller* and most of the international tales) or by the transference of the point of view from one consciousness to another. The dominant spatial transference in James is of course the movement from America to Europe, which James regards

not as a growth or development but as the establishing of the proper conditions (or relations) for the exhibition of the central character's identity. The method that James calls "the planned rotation of aspects" (*AN*, 182) also places a subordinate emphasis on time. As Georges Poulet observes, James "invents a new kind of time, what one might call aesthetic time. It consists in establishing about a center a moving circle of points of view, from one to the other of which the novelist proceeds."¹¹

The fusion of present and past into a single timeless structure no doubt reflects both philosophical and literary convictions. James's more perceptive characters are unusually liberated from the contingencies of time. The same high regard for maximum awareness or intensity of consciousness stands behind James's view of the novel as picture rather than as action.

Narrative movement subserves the major objective of "completeness and seeing things in all their relations" (*N*, 206). Thus it is of significance that James, in his preface to *Roderick Hudson*, confesses his difficulties in suggesting the passage of time (*AN*, 12-15). Time exists; therefore it must be represented, but not in the manner of Tolstoy or Arnold Bennett, in whose works the effect of fluidity diminishes the effect of a logical pattern of relationships.¹² Unlike several of his contemporaries, James was uninterested in the theme of transience—Thackeray's great theme. George Marcher and Lambert Strether may regret the lost opportunities of life and yearn for what might have been, but the interest of their dramas is in the permanent psychological conditions which either cause the privation in their lives or make it meaningful to them. Nor does James represent experience as a succession of aesthetic moments, like the "epiphanies" of Joyce or the "still points" of Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Perception and intensity of awareness are of supreme importance in James, but his enlightened vessels of consciousness seldom exult in isolated ecstatic moments. For them as for the reader, the illumination is an understanding of the complete pattern of relationships surrounding the central situation—an illumination that has little to do with the conditions of time.

Action is subordinate not only to "idea" and "situation," but also to character. As Yvor Winters has observed, James gives unusual emphasis to the free will of his characters.¹³ In this respect, it is worth noting that James's characters literally make the structures of the novels in which they appear. James speaks of Maisie Farange as in large measure constructing her own relationships:

... instead of simply submitting to the inherited tie and the imposed complication, or suffering from them, our little wonder-working agent would create without design, quite fresh elements of this order—contribute, that is, to the formation of a fresh tie, from which it would then (and for all the world as if through a small demonic foresight) proceed to derive great profit (*AN*, 142).

James's adult heroes and heroines create their own relationships with less difficulty than little Maisie, but even Maisie has a greater control over her situation than the characters of most novelists. Thus when James writes, "What is incident but the illustration of character?"¹⁴ he means more than the truisms that character can be manifest only in action and that a person cannot be truly understood until he is tested by experience. He means that incident is a direct expression of will, a virtual synonym of personality.

It follows that in the typical James novel the only significant events are those in which character relations are formed. As James puts it, the "evolution of the fable" is dependent upon the "needful accretions" and "right complications" of relationships (*AN*, 52). Early novels like *The American* and *The Portrait of a Lady* have a large allowance of "plot," even of melodramatic intrigue, but in a good number of James novels from the 1890's on the generalization holds true. *The Awkward Age*, as an obvious example, is essentially a complex pattern of pairings and matchings: each chapter is a meeting of characters, in which one character sees his position altered as he learns more of the attitudes of another. Few happenings affect the material welfare of the characters: Mr. Longdon's proposal to give Van money, the marriage of Mitchy and Little Aggie, Mrs. Brook's calculated destruction of Nanda's reputation. Whatever else engages Mrs. Brook's circle—such as the sexual activities of Cashmore, Aggie, the Duchess, and others—enters the novel only indirectly, as subjects of veiled remarks and rumors. *The Awkward Age* is almost wholly talk, and the talk is all but entirely divorced from event. Action is made additionally subordinate by the preference of James's protagonists for renunciation and their distaste for aggression. The active figures—nearly all "fools"—are seen through the consciousness of the contemplative and usually passive protagonists, who, in turn, have as confidants those who are outside the action entirely.

In many of James's novels and tales the structure derives not from the external action, but from the developing awareness of the central consciousness. Thus such works as "Madame de Mauves," "The Beast in the Jungle," and *The Ambassadors* focus on the mind of the protagonist (or of the observer) in his search for truth. The pattern is that of the quest, but the exploration is inward and not objectified by the framework of a plot. The rhythmic design of *The Turn of the Screw* is indicated in the first sentence of the governess' manuscript: "I remember the whole beginning as a succession of flights and drops, a little see-saw of the right throbs and the wrong." The governess' narrative follows a course from illusion to disillusion and from disillusion to illusion until the final terrible revelation. It is always a question of the children's being either angels or demons; of Bly's being either "a castle of romance" or a castle with an evil "secret," a mystery of Udolpho¹⁵; of the governess' being either

capable or incapable of protecting the children. The structure is thus internal, stimulated by external events, but not represented or illumined by them.

The "events" in the forefront of the novels and tales often appear irrelevant or inconsequential: Mrs. Brook's circle leaves London to spend a weekend at a country house; Fleda Vetch meets Owen Gereth on a London street; Strether sees Chad Newsome at a Paris theater. Is there more to these meetings, movements, and occasions than the bringing together of characters in new arrangements? Or is there a significant level of action concealed beneath the surface, to be discovered only by close attention to imagery and metaphor? Critics have disagreed widely on this question. Interpretations of James's works have not been lacking in discoveries of religious, archetypal, and mythic patterns, of buried melodramatic struggles, of allegories and symbolic schemes of all varieties. On the other hand, some critics, insisting on James's "realism" and pre-eminence as a creator of character, maintain that James should be read only on the psychological level, in which case his stories mean exactly what they say, and no more.

James evidently regarded his highly figurative late style not as a way of suggesting additional levels of meaning, but as a way of gaining vividness. Language is "representational"; words convey "appearances, images, figures, objects, so many important, so many contributive items of the furniture of the world. . ." (*AN*, 346). The fact that some of James's works have been read as versions of conflicting myths and symbolic patterns would indicate either James's disregard for metaphorical coherence or his indifference to the possible connotations of his language. No doubt both Christian and Freudian imagery may be found in *The Turn of the Screw*; *The Ambassadors* most likely offers parallels to both *The Golden Bough* and *The Secret of Swedenborg*. But even when James is acknowledged to be a symbolist—as no reader of *The Wings of the Dove* can deny—it is impossible for any of his works to be read allegorically. Nor is the figure in James's carpet an all-embracing internally consistent arrangement of metaphor. For one thing, James's language invariably inclined toward hyperbole: words like "abyss," "sacred," and "divine" recur in the notebooks and essays as well as in the fiction. The same is true of figures of speech. In the late novels in particular, the figures are often extravagant, even violent; they appear in the dialogue of characters as well as in the reporting of the author. But they serve to elucidate, dramatize, and melodramatize character and situation, rather than to equate them with something external. The graphic physical image is used to represent, literally, a psychological relationship or a state of mind. James's abysses and summits, rivers and boats, assaults and withdrawals,

sacred founts and jungle beasts are inward. They dominate the language not as poetic devices, but as late refinements of the principle set forth in "The Art of Fiction": "The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life. When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the canvas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass."¹⁶

The design of James's novels is therefore not primarily a structure of verbal connotations. Rather the design is revealed through action—events, movements, and gestures which objectify states of consciousness and moral and psychological relationships. Particularly in the works of the middle and late periods, James suggests coherent patterns in sequences of events, each of which taken alone seems inconsequential. The most common external action in *What Maisie Knew* is Maisie's travelling about in a carriage, to, from, and with her various parents and guardians; it is an action that perfectly represents Maisie's forlorn condition.¹⁷ Fleda Vetch's characteristic movement is the effort to withdraw herself from the lives of the Gereths; she is frequently seen running away—to her sister, to her father, to any possible escape—and always being seized by one of the Gereths.¹⁸ R. W. B. Lewis has written of the descent from heights to depths as the significant action of *The Wings of the Dove*.¹⁹

If such rhythmic movements are instances of what Kenneth Burke calls "symbolic action," their purpose is not to suggest analogies with external archetypes, but to contribute to internal cohesiveness. A rhythmic pattern serves the end of dramatizing relationships, not of outlining a sequential progress. Thus the pattern constitutes a picture rather than an action; that is, the rhythm is more repetitive than incremental. Of course, there are instances in James of what E. K. Brown calls "the combination of the repeated and the variable with the repeated."²⁰ The rhythm of *The Spoils of Poynton* is without variation: in effect Fleda constantly re-enacts the same role—that of the victim of a social trap ever seeking but never finding escape. But the rhythm of *The Ambassadors* is both repetitive and progressive. One motif contributing to the larger, densely complex, structure, is made up of various dining scenes.²¹ Most of the stages in Strether's European education are marked by the taking of meals. In London he takes Maria Gostrey to dinner before going to a theater. The occasion is one of a modified but, for Strether, unique indulgence in worldliness. He realizes that in Boston "there had been no little confronted dinner, no pink lights, no whiff of vague sweetness, as a preliminary" to an evening with Mrs. Newsome. Later Strether recollects the dinner with Miss Gostrey as the first stage in his break with Woollett. But the meal in London is just the preliminary to numerous other meals, considerably more charming, in France. At one he feels that "the Paris evening . . . was . . . in the very

taste of the soup, in the goodness . . . of the wine. . . ."²² Meals are by far the most numerous occasions for Strether's awakening of consciousness. The climax of *The Ambassadors* comes when Strether discovers that Chad and Madame de Vionnet are adulterers, after he has sacrificed his hopes for the future by defending them. This recognition scene, like an earlier one in which Strether becomes convinced of the couple's innocence, occurs in a cafe, by a river. The atmosphere is again pastoral, and the implication is again of grace and innocence, of the harmless pleasures of the senses. Sitting at the table in the countryside inn with Chad and Madame de Vionnet, Strether sees that the life of the senses, partly represented by the meal and the rural scene and partly by the now-exposed lovers, is far from innocent. Passion and deceit lie hidden beneath the charm and beauty. And as Strether eventually understands, this ambiguity is central to the character of Europe.

As James says in his preface, his intention in *The Ambassadors* is to demonstrate Strether's "process of vision" (AN, 308). The "march of [the] action" (AN, 308) consists largely in Strether's deepening perception, but the occasions are to a great extent repetitive and only slightly varied. Each of Strether's insights is a discovery of the meaning of the whole of his and everyone's experience. It is his perception alone that is incremental. The recurrence of situations demonstrates that the circumstance in which he is involved remains static. The "events" of the novel—like the announcement that Jeanne de Vionnet will be married, the arrival of the Pococks, and Chad's departure for England—are important not because they indicate a change in the situation, but because they show Strether the true nature of the situation, which, though unchanging, is revealed only gradually.

This mention of *The Ambassadors* brings to mind E. M. Forster's observation that the action of the novel approximates the shape of an hour glass—with Chad and Strether quite apart from each other at the beginning (as regards their relation to Europe), drawing together at the middle, and assuming opposite positions at the end.²³ The pattern is doubtless genuine. But the question arises: of what importance is it? A partial answer lies in James's ideal of roundness. The novel with the finished shape gives the illusion of completeness, and the symmetrical structure is aesthetically pleasing. Yet it is obvious that in any novel an abstract structure of incidents can be of little importance in itself. The only merit of such a geometrical design can be that it assists the attentive reader in recognizing the important relationships in the novel—in this case the relation between the beginning, middle, and end—and ultimately of understanding the characters, who are defined by their changing relations with each other. But nothing could be more meaningless than to observe

the peculiar geometrical figure that the events of a novel may resemble. Nor is there any apparent profit to be derived from assigning symbolic meanings to plot skeletons—at least to those of James's novels. One returns to the principle that James's works, when they succeed, derive their consistency and their coherence wholly from within. Every novel contains its own "logic." Neither figures of hour glasses nor patterns of fortunate falls are of much help in accounting for the placing of characters, the staging of scenes, or the arrangement of details.

James's guiding principle is the necessity of suiting action to idea. Thus the dominant occurrences in his novels are the meetings of characters, wherein one or more of the figures, with the reader, sees further into the idea. It often happens that these meetings additionally assist the reader's (not the character's) "process of vision" by assuming a rhythmic design that becomes a metaphor of the idea.

Since James habitually conceives of his ideas in static and spatial terms, his regular problem is to find appropriate actions—to show something happening which alters the welfare of his major characters and at the same time increases our understanding of the original situation. He confesses that in *The American* the "plot" is largely irrelevant: that is, the "idea" of the novel is Christopher Newman's generosity of spirit, but the action is the intrigue of the Bellegardes, which is only indirectly related to Newman's case. The action is only responsible for Newman's situation; it is not an illumination of that situation (*AN*, 36).

In his later novels James is more successful in matching action to idea, but the arbitrariness and factitiousness of plot in certain shorter works suggest that the problem remained acute when he worked in tighter confines. The notebooks show that James sometimes conceived his shorter tales as actions rather than as pictures. The "anecdote" is his term for an ironic action; the conception of the action precedes the conception of the character. The anecdote compels a sudden and often drastic "climax," a rounding off. In the extended fiction, on the other hand, the "developmental" is given freer play, so that the "climax" is less an event requiring a radical readjustment in character relationships than it is the point at which the protagonist achieves maximum understanding of the situation. Whatever "happens" in the climax of a novel follows from and is subordinate to the protagonist's achieved awareness. Hyacinth Robinson's suicide is a case in point. In many shorter tales (for example, "The Middle Years"), the climax is brought about by a sudden reversal of situation—such as a death—which precipitates a hurried recognition.

In some stories, there is barely any action; all is idea. In "The Great Good Place," the action does nothing more than give a temporal life to the curious *donnée*: George Dane's inexplicable withdrawal to a place of

absolute peace. As Virginia Woolf remarks, "something is wrong with the story. The movement flags; the emotion is monotonous. . . . The story dwindles to a sweet soliloquy."²⁴ What is wrong is simply James's failure to find an action to represent the idea.

In "The Altar of the Dead," on the other hand, the action is an effective embodiment of the idea. The idea is of "a man whose noble and beautiful religion is the worship of the Dead" (N, 164). The action places the man, George Stransom, in a relationship with a woman, who is herself devoted to the dead and worships at the same altar as Stransom. The hinge upon which the action turns is on the face of it arbitrary: Acton Hague, the man whom the woman specifically honors is also the one man in the world whom Stransom cannot honor, cannot forgive for a crime committed against him. Yet at the climax, Stransom, just as he dies, accepts Hague as one of "his" dead. This sketchy summary does no justice to the tone and persuasiveness of the story, but it may suggest that Stransom's involvement with the woman is not an extraneous story mechanically manipulated, but a way of extending Stransom's and the reader's understanding of the relation between living and dead; it is a relation in which wounded pride cannot be admitted.²⁵

Still the action of "The Altar of the Dead" is essentially anecdotal. The final revelation is forced by the coincidence of the woman's love and Stransom's hatred for the same man and by the fortuitous death of Stransom. James's shorter works frequently rely on such unlikely (to James, "ironic") circumstances as means of rushing the climactic recognition.²⁶ The action in the novels is both more credible and less prominent.

The principle of economy has even more harmful consequences in some of James's works. When he employs the consciousness of an outside observer as the reflector of the action, James is in part motivated by the desire to be brief. In his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, he explains that one of the advantages of concentrating on a central character's intelligent awareness of a situation is "the rule of an exquisite economy" (AN, 129). That is, the mind of the observer concentrates and organizes, rather than diffuses, the action. But another effect is to place the emphasis on consciousness rather than on action. The story told from the point of view of one character, particularly if the character is an observer and not an agent, sometimes turns into two stories: one of the situation which occupies the observer's mind and one of the observer himself, his own psychological, intellectual, and moral reactions. James says as much in his preface to *The Spoils*:

I committed myself to making the affirmation and the penetration of [Fleda's intelligence] my action and my "story"; once more, too, with the re-entertained perception that a subject so lighted, a subject residing in somebody's excited and concentrated feeling about something—both the something and the some-

body being of course as important as possible—has more beauty to give out than under any other style of pressure (AN. 128; italics mine).

Fleda is organically a part of the situation, indeed the center of the situation; thus in *The Spoils of Poynton* "the something and the somebody" are not really separate. *The Sacred Fount* is a different case altogether. There are two unrelated subjects of this short novel. In the extensive criticism which the work has provoked most of the attention has been given not to the *prima facie* subject of the sacred fount of personality, but to the narrator, whose intense scrutiny of the situation involving the other characters is as prominent a part of the novel as the situation he observes. Whether this observer is a lunatic, an artist *manqué*, or a Hamlet-like figure reduced to a purely intellectual existence, his relevance to the real or presumed relations of the "active" characters is most tenuous and uncertain.

Had James accepted the conventional narrative method of telling a story, the problem would vanish. But his preference for dealing with a situation that is essentially complete at the start and for concentrating the action in the inquiries and meditations of the onlooker requires that the observer rather than the observed receive the most attention. James's most debated tale, *The Turn of the Screw*, is another instance of a work with two subjects: the (presumed) sinister relation between the ghosts and the children, and the response of the governess. Like the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*, the governess takes it upon herself to sort the evidence and to make a judgment as to what has been going on from the start. The "action" is mainly confined to her intellectual progress. Inevitably critical interest has been in the latter, and the question has been repeatedly raised: how reliable is her analysis? If the governess' analysis is reliable, her own role is secondary; but if her analysis is erroneous, the haunting of the children is secondary, if indeed real.

In a letter to H. G. Wells, James makes clear the source of confusion in *The Turn of the Screw*:

Of course I had, about my young woman, to take a very sharp line. The grotesque business I had to make her picture and the childish psychology I had to make her trace and present, were, for me at least, a very difficult job, in which absolute lucidity and logic, a singleness of effect, were imperative. Therefore I had to rule out subjective complications of her own—play of tone, etc.; and keep her impersonal save for the most obvious and indispensable little note of neatness, firmness and courage—without which she wouldn't have had her data.²⁷

In view of the dozens of studies of the governess' "subjective complications," it can only be concluded that James's description of his tale is inaccurate. His remarks do, however, reveal his intention: to keep the governess subordinate to the "grotesque business" she detects and tries to

end. In part James allows the "developmental" impulse to exceed the confines of the "*jeu d'esprit*" he has projected. It is one of many cases in which "the very simplicity of the action forces me . . . to get everything out of it that it can give" (*N*, 251). It would appear that in *The Turn of the Screw* this compulsion pushes James too far. As in *The Sacred Fount* the psychology of the reflector is so complex and intriguing that the reader is unable to accept the character as simply a reflector.

In most of his works James avoids the difficulty: by having the central consciousness himself an agent in the situation, as in the longer novels; by using the scenic method, with no "subjective complications" or "going behind"; by disallowing any introspection on the part of the reflector. The latter restriction rules most of the shorter tales narrated by or seen through the eyes of a relative outsider: for example, "Brooksmith," "The Real Thing," and "Mora Montravers."

James's striving for condensation and intensity, his contempt for fluid narration—in short, his subordination of action to picture—is the source of most of his technical problems. At times James risks the effect of arbitrariness in positioning his characters, and at other times he pays excessive attention to the mind contemplating the action—both faults stemming from a lack of interest in story as story. But in the majority of his works there is a perfect adjustment of incident to idea, with the events of the story accommodated to the primary purpose of James's craft: the exhibition of human relationships, the truth and beauty of which are not contingent upon the temporal occurrences used by the artist to reveal them.²⁸

NOTES

1. Review of Harriet Elizabeth Prescott, "Azarian: an Episode," *Notes and Reviews*, ed. Pierre de Chignon la Rose (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), pp. 25, 27.
2. *Partial Portraits* (London, 1888), p. 382.
3. "Anthony Trollope," *Partial Portraits*, p. 106. James singles out *The American* as his most excessively plotted novel. See *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), pp. 22-39 (hereafter cited as *AN*) and *Selected Letters of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London, 1956), p. 146.
4. Quoted from a letter to Horace Scudder in *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1955), p. 251 (hereafter cited as *N*).
5. "Anthony Trollope," p. 106.
6. ". . . I'm often accused of not having 'story' enough. . ." (*AN*, 43).
7. Though it includes no mention of James, Joseph Frank's important essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (*Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment*, ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, Gordon McKenzie [New York, 1948], 379-392) is obviously relevant to the present study. Mr. Frank discusses those twentieth-century writers (Joyce, Barnes, Eliot) whose spatial conception of form brings about a total—or near-total—disregard for chronological

- sequence. For James chronological coherence is not ignored, but subordinated.
8. "James's Ideal of Dramatic Form," *Kenyon Review*, V (Autumn, 1943), 501.
 9. "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of 'Tom Jones,'" *Critics and Criticism*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1957), p. 66.
 10. See Laurence Bedwell Holland, *The Expense of Vision: Essays on the Craft of Henry James* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 50-52, for a more detailed analysis of the prefigurative and recollective techniques in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Mr. Holland stresses the close relationship of the very first and the very last scenes: "The novel is virtually framed by these two scenes which begin and complete the pattern of its events and stand so close in the foreground for the reader, the one encountered first in anticipation and initiation, the other encountered first in the retrospect of memory" (p. 50).
 11. *Studies in Human Time*, translated by Elliott Coleman (Baltimore, 1956), pp. 351-352. See also Ian Watt, "The First Paragraph of *The Ambassadors*: An Explication," *Essays in Criticism*, X (July, 1960), 250-274, for a brilliant analysis of the stylistic, syntactical, and grammatical techniques James employs to subordinate action to idea. Mr. Watt shows that James's late prose gives the effect of a "timeless idea based on the report of . . . chronologically separate events . . .," of "characters and actions on a plane of abstract categorization . . .," of a "mental continuum" which easily absorbs disconnected happenings. Also relevant is Hisayoshi Watanabe, "Past Perfect Retrospection in the Style of Henry James," *American Literature*, XXXIV (May, 1962), 165-181.
 12. See Walter F. Wright, *The Madness of Art: A Study of Henry James* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1962), p. 44: "Fluidity is a general term to describe a series of events which do not seem to have an inevitable relation, either because there is no sense of cause and effect or because there is no central focus or harmony of tone."
 13. "Maule's Well; or Henry James and the Relation of Morals to Manners," *Maule's Curse* (Norfolk, Conn., 1938), pp. 187-216.
 14. "The Art of Fiction," *Partial Portraits*, p. 392.
 15. *The Great Short Novels of Henry James*, ed. Philip Rahv (New York, 1944), p. 634.
 16. *Partial Portraits*, p. 378. Also see John Patterson, "The Language of 'Adventure' in Henry James," *American Literature*, XXXII (November, 1960), pp. 291-301.
 17. See Oscar Cargill, *The Novels of Henry James* (New York, 1961), p. 258.
 18. See J. A. Ward, *The Imagination of Disaster: Evil in the Fiction of Henry James* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961), pp. 61-63.
 19. "The Vision of Grace: James's 'The Wings of the Dove,'" *Modern Fiction Studies*, III (Spring, 1957), 36-37.
 20. *Rhythm in the Novel* (Toronto, 1950), pp. 17-18.
 21. The remainder of this paragraph is a summary of a portion of my essay, "Dining with the Novelists," *The Personalist*, XLV (July, 1964), 407-409.
 22. *The Ambassadors* (London, 1906), pp. 37-38, 78.
 23. *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, 1927), pp. 218-234.
 24. "The Ghost Stories," *Henry James: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Leon Edel (New York, 1963), p. 48.
 25. "The Altar of the Dead" is an excellent illustration of the process by which James discovers the meaning of a fictional germ by devising an action for it—a process described and celebrated in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* (AN, 122). The notebook entries on "The Altar of the Dead" suggest nothing of the moral complexity of the finished tale.

26. Such a complaint is made of "The Beast in the Jungle" by Allen Tate, "Three Commentaries," *Sewanee Review*, LVIII (Winter, 1950), 9.
27. *Selected Letters*, p. 182.
28. Sometimes James used the term "picture" to refer to the visual effect he wished to achieve in his work and at other times to the static effect. This essay deals exclusively with the latter sense of the word—a subject neglected by James's critics. James's use of pictorial devices to produce visual effects has been ably discussed by F. O. Matthiessen, "James and the Plastic Arts," *Kenyon Review*, V (Autumn, 1943), 533-550; and Viola Hopkins, "Visual Art Devices and Parallels in the Fiction of Henry James," *PMLA*, LXXVI (December, 1961), 561-574.